

BURT-STARK MANSION
400 North Main Street
Abbeville
Abbeville County
South Carolina

HABS SC-878
HABS SC-878

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BURT-STARK HOUSE

HABS NO. SC-878

Location: 400 North Main Street, Abbeville, Abbeville County, South Carolina, 29620. The Burt-Stark house is situated in the fork of Main and Greenville streets and faces southeast, directly toward the town square, which is two blocks south.

Significance: The Burt-Stark house was constructed around 1850 by David Lesly, a local lawyer and planter, and came in the midst of a building spree among Abbeville's planters.¹ Benefitting from burgeoning cotton prices, large-scale farmers were building impressive town houses in Abbeville during the 1840s.² The *Abbeville Press & Banner* noted in 1880 that "From 1850 to 1860 a majority of the fine houses of the town were erected..."³ A series of fires in the following decades demolished nearly all of these town houses. Their destruction left the Greek Revival Burt-Stark house as one of the few remaining antebellum residences in the town. The Burt-Stark house provides an example of an upper middle-class townhouse in rural antebellum Abbeville. Its four-square room configuration, high ceilings, and wide central hall are typical of southern Greek revival residential architecture. The house also exhibits vernacular details characteristic of later residential architecture in the region, such as geometric railing designs.

The Burt-Stark house became a National Historic Landmark in 1992 on account of its role in the end of the Civil War.⁴ On May 2, 1865 Jefferson Davis, routed President of the Confederate States of America, arrived in Abbeville and headed immediately to his friend Armistead Burt's residence, which is today known as the Burt-Stark house. Davis was fleeing after General Lee's surrender at Appomattox. During his short stay at the Burt-Stark house, he conducted the last meeting of the war council. Present were Braxton Bragg, John C. Breckenridge, and five other officers. Though Davis entered the meeting determined that the South could and should continue fighting, the council concluded differently. When Davis walked out of the Burt-Stark house, the war council, as well as the Confederate States of America, dissolved.⁵

Description: The Greek Revival Burt-Stark house is a two-story, four-square, central hall plan structure, constructed with heavy timber framing and sheathed with clapboards. It sits on a raised brick-pier basement, measures five bays across and three bays

¹ Deed for the sale of David Lesly's property to N.H. Miller (12 Dec. 1850), in the private collection of Mrs. Linda Hill, Abbeville, South Carolina.

² Lowry Ware, *Old Abbeville: Scenes of the Past of a Town Where Old Time Things Are Not Forgotten* (Columbia: SCMAR, 1992), 58.

³ *Abbeville Press & Banner*, 28 July 1880. From Ware's *Old Abbeville... Not Forgotten*, 58.

⁴ Edwin C. Bearss, "National Historic Landmark Nomination, Burt-Stark Mansion" (Washington, D.C.: NPS, 1992), 8.

⁵ Edward Alfred Pollard, *Life of Jefferson Davis: With a Secret History of the Southern Confederacy, Gathered "Behind the Scenes in Richmond"* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1869), 519-21.

deep, and has an early mansard roof, which is sheathed with metal standing-seam panels. A separate porch adorns each side of the house, with the western, northern, and eastern porches being one-story, and the southern (main) portico being two stories. Decorative lattice-work, one of the most distinctive exterior elements of the residence, embellishes the one-story porches. The two-story portico is supported by four square columns, which enhance the Greek revival feel of the exterior and demark the southern entry as the formal one. Italianate brackets line the top of the house, separating the clapboards from the roof, and two white, stucco chimneys protrude from the western and eastern inclines of the roof.

On the north façade, the three additions to the house are apparent. The earliest, a one-story, gabled, bedroom on the northwestern corner of the house, was probably added in the 1860s, by the Burts. Its construction is similar to that of the main house, using mostly hand-hewn boards, but of smaller dimensions than those in the original sector. The other two additions were constructed simultaneously by James Stark in 1905.⁶ The first is a bathroom, which precariously protrudes from the north end of the second floor hall and perches on top of the house's northern porch. The second is a modern kitchen, replacing the original kitchen building, which still stands on the northeastern corner of the lot. This addition is a small, gable-roofed room that attaches with a hyphen to the northern end of the eastern porch, which has been converted to a butler's pantry.

The formal entry to the house is a recessed doorway flanked by columnettes, attenuated sidelights, and topped by a transom and is found in the building's main elevation. It opens into the airy first floor hall, which served as a receiving area for guests to the house. The ceilings of all rooms on the first floor of the main block of the house stand 11'4" high. The residents of the Burt-Stark house afforded themselves privacy by dividing the first floor hall into front and back portions with a double door and fanlight. To the south of the doors are the front portion of the hall and twin parlors, with matching mantels and cove crown mouldings. In the back portion of the hall, a stair ascends along the western wall, lands, turns, and continues up the northern wall. A dining room lies to the east of the rear hall. To the west is a bedroom. Of these rooms, the only ones that no longer retain their original crown mouldings are the bedroom and the halls. The 1860s bedroom addition is accessible through the north wall of the downstairs bedroom. The butler's pantry, hyphen, and 1905 kitchen are accessible from the eastern wall of the dining room.

The second floor is open, with the wide central hall uninhibited. Off the northern wall is the upstairs bathroom. On the east and west of the hall are two rooms each, all serving as bedrooms. The hall's southern wall opens onto a balcony on the two-story portico within the Burt-Stark house's main elevation. The only access

⁶ Bearss, "National Historic Landmark Nomination, Burt-Stark Mansion," 4.

to the attic, which is used for storage, is through a hatch in the ceiling of the northeastern second floor bedroom.

Few original finishes in the main portion of the Burt-Stark house remain. All plaster walls have been replaced with sheetrock, sparing the crown mouldings. The nogging in the walls, floors, and much of the original finished woodwork throughout the house, however, remain. Paint analysis reveals that many of the original finishes on the woodwork of the Burt-Stark house was faux grained or marbled. Faux mahogany graining was found on the balcony doors, the door from the southeastern parlor to the east porch, and the door from the downstairs hall to the north porch. The upstairs bedrooms revealed abundant amounts of marbling, appearing primarily on mantels and baseboards. While faux graining and marbling were relatively common in urban hubs, such as Charleston, they are a much rarer find in an area as rural as 1850s Abbeville. The presence of faux graining and marbling as original finishes solidifies the Burt-Stark house's position among the finest mid-nineteenth-century houses in the South Carolina Upstate.

While inventories reveal that there were once numerous outbuildings on the property, only the kitchen building remains today.⁷ Situated in the northeast corner of the lot, the one-story, two-room, central chimney building served as the kitchen for the Burt-Stark house from the time of the house's construction up until James Stark built the modern kitchen in 1905. Both before and after the modern kitchen was built, the kitchen building also served as housing for the help.⁸

History: The original owner, David Lesly, and his wife lived in a farmhouse outside Abbeville's limits that he sold on December 12, 1850 to move presumably into the newly completed Burt-Stark house.⁹ Lesly enjoyed the house only briefly, as he died early in 1854. His widow continued to live in the house for a year. On August 10, 1855 John Lesly, executor of the estate, sold the Burt-Stark house to Harriet Harrison.¹⁰

⁷"An Appraise Bill of the Est. David Lesly Dec'd," from David Lesly's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 131, package 3816.

"Schedule of Personal Property belonging to Jas A Norwood decd 1875," James A. Norwood's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 200, package 5317.

⁸ David Lesly's inventory lists items such as a bookcase, a shotgun, and a fender in the second room of the kitchen building.

"An Appraise Bill of the Est. David Lesly Dec'd," from David Lesly's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 131, package 3816.

The 1912 Sanborn Fire Insurance map for the Burt-Stark house shows that the old kitchen building was being used as servants' quarters at the time.

1912 Abbeville Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (Atlanta: Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, 1912).

⁹ Deed for the sale of David Lesly's property to N.H. Miller (12 Dec. 1850), in the private collection of Mrs. Linda Hill, Abbeville, South Carolina.

¹⁰ "Sale Bill of Real Estate of David Lesly Dec'd- House & Lot," from David Lesly's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 131, package 3816.

Harriet Harrison was an independent woman by nineteenth century standards. Divorced, she acted as the head of her household, which in 1855 included her daughter, son-in-law, granddaughter, mother, and slaves. Harrison was originally from central South Carolina, but she moved to Abbeville when her daughter's husband, Thomas Alexander Hoyt, started working as the pastor of Upper Long Cane Presbyterian Church outside the town in 1852. The Harrison-Hoyts lived in the Burt-Stark house until the spring of 1860, when Reverend Hoyt accepted the pastor position at the First Presbyterian Church of Louisville, Kentucky.¹¹ After leaving Abbeville, the family continued to move frequently, as Hoyt worked a variety of jobs in numerous locations, including a stint on the Gold Board (a part of the New York Stock Exchange).¹²

To whom the Burt-Stark passed after Harriet Harrison is something of a mystery, since a series of fires destroyed all deeds prior to 1873 that were housed in the town's courthouse. Abbeville lore maintains that Andrew Simonds, president of the short-lived Abbeville branch of the Bank of the State of South Carolina, bought the house in 1860, shortly after his January wedding to Sallie Calhoun.¹³ Around 1862, Simonds sold the Burt-Stark house to Armistead Burt and moved elsewhere in Abbeville.¹⁴

Armistead Burt, the most famous owner of the Burt-Stark house, only lived in the house for the next ten years. It was during his ownership that the event many view as the most significant to happen in Abbeville's history occurred. Born in upstate South Carolina, Burt educated himself, pursuing a career in law. His marriage to Martha Calhoun, a favorite daughter of John C. Calhoun, propelled his career forward, and the couple moved to Washington, D.C. in 1842.¹⁵ During this time, Armistead Burt served as a congressman. In the ten years in which the Burts lived in Washington, they met and cultivated a close friendship with Jefferson and Varina Davis. In 1853, Armistead and Martha Burt moved back to South Carolina, and around 1862, they purchased the Burt-Stark house.¹⁶

When the Civil War broke out, Armistead Burt quickly asserted his support of the Confederate cause. Though he was too old to fight, Burt gave a great deal of his personal wealth to fund the war. After General Lee surrendered at Appomattox in

¹¹ Pearl M. Stevensen, *"Keeping the Faith": A History of Upper Long Cane Presbyterian Church, Abbeville, South Carolina* (Greenwood: Drinkard Printing Company, 1976), 16.

¹² James K. Medbury, *Men and Mysteries of Wall Street* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007, originally published in 1878), 272.

¹³ John T. Manning, ed., *Portals to the Past: Marriages, Abbeville, South Carolina, 2,600 Marriages 1750-1964* (Abbeville: Abbeville Historical Society, 2004).

¹⁴ This is based on Abbeville tradition. The Abbeville newspapers did not run in 1862, and the transaction may not have been publicized anyways, as Andrews Simonds and Martha Calhoun Burt were relatives, so the sale was a transaction within the family.

¹⁵ Manning, *Portals to the Past*.

¹⁶ Lowry Ware, *Slaveholders of Abbeville District, 1790-1860 and Largest Property Holders, 1860* (Due West: s.n., 1997), 24, 33, 43.

1865, Varina Davis and her children fled southward, stopping briefly at the Burt-Stark house. Little did Varina Davis know that within a matter of days her husband would also stop over at the same house. On May 2, 1865 Jefferson Davis arrived at the Burt-Stark house and convened the final war council meeting. When the meeting concluded, the war council and the Confederate States of America dissolved.¹⁷

The Civil War drained Armistead Burt's wealth. In 1860, Burt's personal estate was valued at \$20,000 and his real estate at \$50,000.¹⁸ The 1870 federal census, however, appraised his personal estate at just \$2,000 and listed no real estate.¹⁹ Martha Burt fell ill and died in 1869.²⁰ Though he was poor, Armistead Burt remained a respected and active Abbeville citizen. He sold the Burt-Stark house around 1872.

James Norwood bought the Burt-Stark house from Armistead Burt. Like Burt, Norwood had been wealthy before the Civil War. He fared little better during the course of the war, barely escaping financial ruin. In 1872, when he moved his large family into the Burt-Stark house, Norwood was already suffering from rapidly deteriorating health. It quickly became evident to Armistead Burt that Norwood's financial position was worse than he had let on and that Norwood had no intention of paying him for the house. On September 15, 1872 Armistead Burt filed a complaint against James Norwood for unpaid fees of \$8,703.62, with interest.²¹ As he became increasingly ill, James Norwood conveyed property to his wife, Sarah Norwood. One of the first parcels conveyed was the Burt-Stark house. When James Norwood died in 1875, numerous debtors placed complaints against his estate.²²

After her husband's death, Sarah Norwood successfully combated debtors and retained ownership of the Burt-Stark house. As a widow during Reconstruction in the South, not to mention the widow of a man with exceptional debts, Sarah Norwood had very little money. To make ends meet, she rented out rooms in the house.²³ Nevertheless, the Burt-Stark house fell into disrepair during this time.

¹⁷ Pollard, *Life of Jefferson Davis*, 519-21.

¹⁸ Sonia L. Walker, *Abbeville County, South Carolina: A Compilation of Data from the 1860 Slave Schedule and a List of Free African Americans on the 1860 Census* (Abbeville: Abbeville Books, 1996), 4.

¹⁹ "United States Census (1870)," Abbeville, Abbeville County, South Carolina, from Ancestry.com (Accessed 27 April 2011).

²⁰ "Obituary of Martha Calhoun Burt," from the *Abbeville Press*, April 1869, from <http://files.usgwarchives.org/sc/abbeville/newspapers/> (Accessed 17 January 2010).

²¹ "Execution Against Property," James A. Norwood's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 200, package 5317.

²² James A. Norwood's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 200, package 5317.

²³ "Schedule of Personal Property Belonging to Jas A Norwood decd 1875," from James A. Norwood's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 200, package 5317.
Ibid., "First Returns of the estate."

When Sarah Norwood died in 1887, she left the house to her three daughters; Sallie Calhoun, Lila Norwood, and Bessie Norwood.²⁴

Of the three daughters, only Sallie Calhoun had married at the time of their mother's death.²⁵ Sallie Calhoun, her husband E.B., and their two sets of twin girls, Martha and Sarah, aged seventeen, and Willie and Floride, aged nine, moved into the Burt-Stark house, where Lila and Bessie Norwood were already living.²⁶ Bessie Norwood stayed for only a short while, marrying R. Mays Cleveland and moving to Greenville in 1889.²⁷ Lila Norwood, however, remained until her death in 1901.²⁸

The Calhouns were poor, and the Burt-Stark house continued to fall into disrepair, but it once again became the center of activity that it was during the Burts' ownership. The older set of Calhoun twins, Martha and Sarah, ran a dancing school for young girls and boys out of the residence.²⁹ In March 1903, the Calhouns sold the Burt-Stark house to James S. Stark and moved to Atlanta, Georgia.³⁰

James Stark came from a long line of Abbeville families and appreciated the Burt-Stark house for its historical importance. Members of the Stark family held the house for eighty-four years, longer than any other owner. When James Stark purchased the residence in 1903, much work needed to be done to bring it up-to-date. This included the additions of a bathroom on the second floor and a modern kitchen off the house's northeastern corner.³¹

It was nearer to 1905 when the Stark family finally moved into the Burt-Stark house. With James Stark came his wife Ann, his twin daughters Mary and Fannie, and his niece Hattie.³² In 1912, Mary Stark wed Dr. Thomas Lyles Davis and moved to Georgia.³³ Fannie, however, refused to leave the Burt-Stark house. When she married John McKee in 1927, she insisted that he move in with her.³⁴ When Mary Stark Davis notified her father in 1945 that she and her husband

²⁴ "Last Will and Testament of Sarah A. Norwood Decd," from Sarah Norwood's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 248, package 6096.

²⁵ Not the same Sallie Calhoun as the aforementioned wife of Andrew Simonds.

²⁶ "United States Census (1880)," Abbeville, Abbeville County, South Carolina, from FamilySearch, https://www.familysearch.org/search/recordDetails/show?uri=https://api.familysearch.org/records/pal:/MM9.1.r/MHZJ-V7C/p_317323213 (Accessed 26 April 2011).

²⁷ "Effie 'Bessie' Norwood," from RootsWeb.com, <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com> (Accessed 11 February 2011).

²⁸ "United States Census (1900)," Abbeville town, Abbeville County, South Carolina, from FamilySearch, https://www.familysearch.org/search/recordDetails/show?uri=https://api.familysearch.org/records/pal:/MM9.1.r/M9TK-BX3/p_93169656 (Accessed 26 April 2011).

²⁹ *Abbeville Press & Banner*, 22 January 1896. Compliments of Dr. Lowry Ware.

³⁰ Deed book 24, page 157, Abbeville deed office, Abbeville Courthouse.

³¹ "United States Census (1910)," Atlanta Ward 8, Fulton, Georgia, from FamilySearch.

³² Bearss, "National Historic Landmark Nomination, Burt-Stark Mansion," 5.

³³ "United States Census (1900)," Abbeville town, Abbeville County, South Carolina.

³⁴ Manning, *Portals to the Past*.

³⁴ Lynne West, "Celebrates 100th at Belmont Inn," from the *Greenwood Index Journal*, 26 May 1985.

intended to move back into the Burt-Stark house, Fannie Stark McKee hastily convinced her father to convey the residence to her.³⁵

Soon after Mary and Dr. Davis returned to Abbeville, Dr. Davis died. James Stark died in the early 1950s, leaving his twin daughters living in the Burt-Stark house.³⁶ In late 1961, Fannie Stark McKee remarried, only months before her death. Although she had a will, it was not proven by the court, and her estate was split between her sister, Mary Stark Davis, and her second husband, J. Rutledge Connor. In her will, Fannie S. M. Connor stipulated that the Burt-Stark house was to go to Connie Maxwell Children's Home but that Mary Stark Davis was to be allowed to live there as long as she pleased.³⁷ On October 19, 1962 J. Rutledge Connor and Mary Stark Davis conveyed the Burt-Stark house to Connie Maxwell Children's Home for ten dollars.³⁸

At the time of the conveyance, Mary Stark Davis was nearly eighty years old. She continued to live in the Burt-Stark house for twenty-two years. As she grew older, she became increasingly attached to the building. In 1971, at her urging, the Abbeville County Historic Preservation Commission was created. The sole goal of the commission was to run the Burt-Stark house as a house museum after Mary Stark Davis' death.³⁹ In order to do so, the commission first had to purchase the residence back from Connie Maxwell Children's Home. It bought it for \$30,000 in 1971.⁴⁰

Mary Stark Davis died in 1987, and the Burt-Stark house passed fully into the hands of the Abbeville Historic Preservation Commission.⁴¹ It has operated as a house museum since. In 1992, the Burt-Stark house became a National Historic Landmark in remembrance of its role in the end of the Civil War.

Sources:

1912 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. Atlanta: Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, 1912.

³⁵ "Dr. T.L. Davis to Make Home Here," *Abbeville Press & Banner*, 8 February 1945. Compliments of Dr. Lowry Ware.

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³⁶ South Carolina Deaths, 1944-1955, from FamilySearch,

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/recordDetails/show?uri=https://api.familysearch.org/records/pal:/MM9.1.r/MMS4-6BW/p1> (Accessed 26 April 2011).

³⁷ "Estate of Fannie M. Connor," from Fannie Connor's Probate Records, Abbeville Courthouse, Abbeville Probate Office, box 443, package 10,981.

³⁸ Deed book 98, page 459, Abbeville deed office, Abbeville Courthouse.

³⁹ Bearss, "National Historic Landmark Nomination, Burt-Stark Mansion," 4.

⁴⁰ Deed book 111, page 525, Abbeville deed office, Abbeville Courthouse.

⁴¹ U.S. Social Security Death Index, from FamilySearch,

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Historian: Grace Washam. This historical report was written as part of the author's thesis for the Master of Science in Historic Preservation program at the College of Charleston/Clemson University.